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What is anti-imperialism in 2022

By Lotte Rørtoft-Madsen, chairperson Danish Communist Party

It is not excusable to associate oneself with Western imperialism and NATO under the pretext of opposing Russian imperialism. If we do so, we lose our political compass.

In the course of the last six months of war in Ukraine, left forces around the world have been challenged politically and ideologically, not only by their own wartime governments and their propaganda machine, but also from within, so to speak:

“You cannot be a leftist if you do not unequivocally support Ukraine,” wrote Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek in Britain’s *The Guardian* on June 21 under the headline “Pacifism is the wrong response to the war in Ukraine”.

This is just more of the same them-and-us mentality, as launched by US President Bush during the war on terror: “You’re either with us or against us.”

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine complicates a decades-long effort by the left to fight the US-led NATO alliance. We now face a weakened NATO resistance. Peace movement signals have been unclear in several countries. This is of course due to the war governments’ deafening propaganda and unrestrained unilateralism. But it is also because there are forces on the left itself that complicate the picture, create uncertainty – or even give up and change basic positions.

In the spring I came across an article on solidaritet.dk, written by a number of prominent people from the Red Green Alliance, *Enhedslisten*. The article is entitled “6 theses on anti-imperialism after Putin’s war” and on closer examination it turns out that its views are not limited to a Danish context. They are in fact international and have their roots in the concepts and discussions we can encounter in the leading system-preserving and war-making circles.

Let me review their main points.

A “classic imperialist aggression” a la Iraq

Claim: “Russia’s war in Ukraine is a classic imperialist aggression in the style of the war against Iraq in 2003.”

It is absolutely true that this is an imperialist war, because neither side is fighting the cause of the working class or op-

pressed nations. But it is not an imperialist robber war, where two equal powers or coalitions are facing each other. It is – from the crucial considerations – an asymmetric war. A war between unequal competitors.

On one side stands a regional capitalist superpower that has failed to rise to a central place in the imperialist world system. On the contrary, it is economically on the periphery of the imperialist world system. Its leading circles advocate Great Russian chauvinism and have imperialist ambitions which they have not yet succeeded in fulfilling.

On the other hand, the world’s strongest imperialist powers are in coalition.

As a major capitalist power, Russia is logically seeking to assert its right to exist and to avert the isolation, containment and risk of balkanisation and possible regime change that NATO’s eastward expansion is causing.

If you think that this is a classic imperialist war a la Iraq, you are turning a blind eye to everything that has happened since the fall of the Soviet Union three decades ago. You do not analyse the actual balance of power in the world – and in your eagerness to condemn Russia, you end up appeasing the strongest imperialist coalition and, most importantly, the coalition of which your own government is a part.

“Support the armed resistance”

Therefore, the left must “stand behind the Ukrainian resistance struggle” and further: “Supporting Ukraine militarily is also not contradictory to seeking a peaceful solution.”

In other words: If we do not arm the Ukrainian people, we cynically leave them to their own fate and let them bleed to death. This raises the question: is it naive pacifism to oppose the prolongation of the war, as NATO and the US are so clearly counting on?

In my opinion, no.

Not a single weapon for war is our clear slogan when it comes to a war that benefits no people but is detrimental to the working classes in all the belligerent countries.

That does not mean that we are indifferent pacifists. Our pacifism does not stem from a strategy of non-violence or knee-jerk pacifism. We are pacifists here because we are against imperialist militarism, against the arms and war industry and against the profit motive for war.

So our pacifism is class-based and based on anti-imperialism.

“NATO protects the peoples of Eastern Europe”

Another claim: “NATO membership has given them (Eastern Europeans, LRM) protection from the Russian imperialism they have always lived under.”

Throughout the article in question there are several such formulations, and no distinction is made between the Russia of the Tsarist era, the socialist years of the Soviet Union and the neoliberal imperialist crusade against the East of the last 40 years or more. Russia is the same – whatever the system. The peoples of Eastern Europe have “lived for decades with their necks under the Russians’ boots”.

This adds to the general Russophobia and Russophobia that certainly exists in several Eastern European countries. Instead of urging understanding between peoples.

For has the excessive rearmament of the countries of Eastern Europe helped bring peace or rather increased the risk of conflict and war? Surely sovereignty is best guaranteed through security agreements and peace treaties, mechanisms for dialogue and the protection of minorities and the securing of borders?

If you believe that NATO is protecting the peoples of Eastern Europe, then that is tantamount to turning these countries into staging areas for NATO and US imperialism. Once again, in eagerness to combat one, smaller power, the larger ones are being defended.

“NATO must be dismantled, but this is not an actual demand”

Further: Dismantling NATO today would “leave two brutal anti-democratic autocracies as the dominant military world powers, and that would hardly make the world a better place.”

Here we come across the word autocracy, which is used again and again in the article on solidaritet.dk. Autocracy means “a form of government in which power is concentrated in one person”. It is a concept that has taken hold in recent years. For example, US President Biden declared in Poland on 26 March this year that the war in Ukraine is “a struggle between democracy and autocracy”. And last June, during a visit to Britain, he said:

“We are in a struggle, not just with China ... with autocrats, autocratic governments around the world, over whether democracies can compete with them in a rapidly changing 21st century.”

So when parts of the left warn against autocracies in this way, and in effect let the fight against them trump the fight against US imperialism, they are putting themselves in the slipstream of imperialism’s argument.

In 2017, the socialist online media Piopio warned against “autocracy – Europe’s new form of government”. Here it is Hungary led by Victor Orban, Poland by Jaroslaw Kaczynski, Turkey by Erdogan.

But apparently there is a difference between autocracies – there are those with which “we”, here understood as the imperialist West, are in a club, and then there are those which are actually challenging “us”. Dividing the world into democracies and autocracies is thus a deception. It makes people fight in the wrong directions. It is an attempt to create a world order with the US as the leading power in the “anti-autocracy” camp.

“Dangerous to leave NATO today”

If we, as leftists and peaceniks, insist on the “get out of NATO” demand, “NATO would disintegrate, leaving Russia’s neighbours at Putin’s mercy and Russia and China as the world’s dominant superpowers under current global conditions,” the article says. It will also be harder to defend Denmark without NATO membership.

In fact, it subscribes to NATO’s new strategic concept and calls for a fight against Russia and China.

At the NATO summit in Madrid in June, the alliance’s new strategic concept on Russia states that Russia constitutes “the most important and direct threat to the security of the alliance and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area”. It is against this background that the summit adopted the most comprehensive and dangerous military build-up in the history of the alliance.

But Russia is only the way to gain dominance over the Eurasian continent. For the US, China is the great systemic rival. Hence NATO’s new Strategic Concept, which otherwise in many ways balances the Chinese threat:

“We will work together responsibly as Allies to address the systemic challenges posed by the People’s Republic of China...”

The authors of the article call it a “unilateral position” to maintain the demand for Danish withdrawal from NATO. Because if we as left forces and revolutionaries take this “lone position” and demand NATO dissolved, then the necessary fight against Russia and China cannot be fought.



That position is ominous in terms of what will happen in the event of a military confrontation between the US and China.

“NATO must be reformed”

More selected picks from the article:

“Remain in NATO ... work for the organization to evolve into a pure defense alliance ... as NATO’s charter actually prescribes.”
... respect for a rules-based international order ... common program for reform of NATO ...”

Pleading that NATO can be reformed from within, returning to an original state of affairs that never really existed, is naïve at best – in reality it is deeply damaging. There is no “good core NATO” to return to.

The reality is that the NATO alliance was created for the purpose of militarily containing the then socialist camp. It was in words a defence alliance, but in practice a war alliance. That is why NATO was also tasked from the outset with fighting the communist enemy within. The post-war interception and surveillance of progressive forces, communists and trade unionists has thus been common policy.

NATO was officially created as a defence of peace and freedom – but in practice it meant war and control.

This has become particularly clear since the collapse of socialism in Europe, where NATO has abandoned acting only “in the area” but is now also acting “out of area”. From 1991, this meant expansion eastwards. From 1999, worldwide. Yes, all over the world.

In 1999 – NATO’s 50th anniversary – I wrote against the backdrop of eastward expansion:

“A new iron curtain is descending over Europe. It is creating fear and tension in the countries of Eastern Europe, and the seeds of new conflicts. It is dangerously challenging Russia. NATO has already conducted its first exercises deep inside the territory of the old Soviet Union. At the same time, a new spiral of armament has been set in motion...”

Here we are, 23 years later, in the midst of the war that could have been predicted.

For us, opposition to NATO is a matter of principle, about war and armament, but also about the struggle for a different society. In that struggle, too, NATO is a principal opponent.

I would like to illustrate just how far we can go if we take the path of reforming NATO from within. For if you go down the road of weighing up the pros and cons of NATO membership, you run the risk of reaching the point where solid ground disappears under you. During the final debate of the Folketting on 23 May, the spokesperson of the Red Green Alliance, Mai Villadsen, was grilled in a joint bourgeois and social democratic onslaught. And to such an extent that she was

pressured into saying that “the advantages are of course that it is a defence cooperation.” And further:

“One could also say that the advantage is in fact also that there is a nuclear umbrella, which is of course part of NATO.”

A defence of NATO’s nuclear strategy needs no comment here.

Cultural imperialism

The argument about democracies and autocracies, on the other hand, deserves a few more words. For what really underlies this is a form of cultural imperialism.

Right-wing politician Jan E. Jørgensen said in the Debate on Danish national television, June 2:

“Where is there a continent that works better than Europe?... Where are there societies so civilised, so prosperous, so well-functioning as on the continent of Europe? The answer is: nowhere else. So if we, with our values and our way of doing things in the world, should not be a beacon, who the hell should?”

In essence, Jan E. Jørgensen’s statements do not differ much from the mentality of the colonial era, for example as expressed in Jungle Book author Rudyard Kipling’s infamous 1899 poem “The White Man’s Burden”. Here, a message of the cultural superiority and educative function of empire over “primitive” peoples is celebrated. One of the verses reads:

“Take up the White Man’s burden

Send forth the best ye breed

Go send your sons to exile

To serve your captives’ need

To wait in heavy harness

On fluttered folk and wild

Your new-caught, sullen peoples,

Half devil and half child”

We in the West – the US, NATO countries, the EU plus a few states like Australia, Japan and New Zealand – we the whites, may be a very small minority of the world’s population, but where else do you have societies so “civilized, so prosperous, so well-functioning”? So, apparently, we also have the right to define the values to which everyone must subscribe.

Communities who share the same ideas

EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen talks about “partners who share the same ideas”. While seeking “energy

partnerships" with autocracies like Azerbaijan, Egypt and Qatar.

So there are values, and there are values, and it is entirely relative and conditioned by self-interest when they have any real meaning rather than being merely for propaganda purposes.

Other examples: US President Biden recently travelled to Saudi Arabia, whose leadership has had a journalist dismembered and is responsible for a disastrous war of aggression against Yemen. Community of values? And do we in Denmark share values with an anti-abortion US?

Or what about the community of ideas with Ukraine?

Since Russia's invasion, Ukraine has banned 11 parties, including the main opposition party, the non-socialist Opposition Platform – For Life. The Left Opposition, the Union of Left Forces, the Ukrainian Socialist Party and other organisations have also been banned, most recently the Ukrainian Communist Party.

The Zelensky government is also – at least temporarily – eliminating important labour laws and to a Danish trade union, Vasyl Andreyev, president of the construction workers union Profbud, says the Zelensky government is no friend of the trade union movement and workers.

"Zelensky calls himself a liberal democrat, but he is far from neoliberal, with close contacts to big business. He believes in deregulation and that the market should take care of itself. That's why he wants to change the law to give employers more options."

Community of ideas with whom in the EU and Denmark?

Anti-imperialism in 2022

With all this in mind, we must ask ourselves what anti-imperialism is anno 2022. If we cannot answer that question clearly, we as revolutionaries and communists have no relevance.

It is quite clear that in the daily struggle of the working class it is not the NATO issue and the anti-imperialist struggle that are at the forefront of consciousness. At the moment, the struggle for survival, to mitigate the effects of the war is at the centre:

We face the biggest real wage drop since 1995. The first families have already been evicted from public housing because they cannot pay the rent due to rising energy prices. Single people and other families are considering taking more jobs to pay extremely rising heating bills – or turning off the heat this winter. Pensioners and others receiving public benefits are particularly affected.

So we need more social spending – rather than spending for arms. The working class must not pay for the Western

monopolies' demands for continued predation on the working class and the peoples of the world. The struggle for wages and working conditions and against future unemployment and poverty is at the centre. Our economy must not be militarised. Roll back the "national compromise" and spend the extra NATO billions on social rearmament, climate and price rise compensation.

These are very concrete problems and very concrete struggles that require our response and involvement. But in reality they are linked to the question of anti-imperialism and NATO.

The more we are entwined with imperialism and its wars, the closer we are to the NATO core and EU militarisation, the more burdens fall on the shoulders of the Danish working class.

This is also why there is a link to the question of anti-imperialism and NATO. It is therefore not irrelevant whether we adopt a course of revolt against imperialism or whether we have a course of allying ourselves with parts of the forces of imperialism. It is not excusable to associate ourselves with Western imperialism and NATO under the guise of combating Russian imperialism. If so we will lose our political compass.

There is no concrete struggle against capitalism without anti-imperialism. There is no socialism – or struggle for it – without anti-imperialism. And there can be no anti-imperialism in a small, compliant country like Denmark without an international outlook, without international solidarity, without opening our eyes for the struggle of the working class and the peoples of the countries which have been under the heel of imperialism for more than 100 years.

This is an edited and shortened version of a speech given by Lotte Rørtoft-Madsen at the Red Summer Camp of Danish Communist Party in July 2022 under the title "War in Europe – consequences and aftermath".

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